DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 047 PS 024 844

AUTHOR Borgia, Eileen T.; Schuler, Dorothy
TITLE Action Research in Early Childhood Education. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-PS-96-11
PUB DATE Nov 96
CONTRACT RR93002007
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Action Research; *Classroom Research; Critical Thinking; Data Collection; Early Childhood Education; Educational Research; *Participatory Research; Professional Development; Qualitative Research; Reflective Teaching; *Research Design; *Research Methodology; Self Evaluation (Individuals); Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Improvement
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Teacher Researchers

ABSTRACT

Action research is an approach to professional development and improved student learning in which teachers systematically reflect on their work, seek feedback from colleagues, and make changes in their practice. Several benefits of action research have been cited: (1) teachers investigate their own practice in a new way, looking at what children actually do and what they themselves do; (2) teachers develop a deeper understanding of children, of the learning process, and of their role in the educational lives of children; (3) teachers are viewed as equal partners with their collaborators in deciding what works best in their situation; (4) solutions are arrived at cooperatively; (5) teachers are often more committed to implementation of a project that they have been involved in designing; and (6) action research is an ongoing process--its principles can be applied elsewhere. Action research begins with a focus or question, which frequently is modified as data are gathered and the process continues. After reflection and discussion, a research question is conceptualized, and a plan of action is developed. The teacher implements the plan, keeping detailed anecdotal records. The research methods used are often qualitative, including detailed documentation, although quantitative methods are sometimes included for triangulation purposes. Involvement in action research includes: (1) commitment--those who agree to participate should know that they will be involved with the project for a year or more; (2) collaboration--the power relations among participants are equal; (3) concern--the interpretive nature of action research means that the participants will develop a support group of critical friends; (4) consideration--reflection is a challenging, critical assessment of one's own behavior as a means of developing one's craftsmanship; and (5) change--change is ongoing and difficult, but it is an important element in remaining effective as a teacher. (Contains 10 references.) (LPP)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC • Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education

University of Illinois • 805 W. Pennsylvania Ave. • Urbana, IL 61801-4897
(217) 333-1386 • (800) 583-4135 • ericeece@uiuc.edu

ERIC DIGEST
November 1996 • EDO-PS-96-11

ED 401 047

Action Research in Early Childhood Education

Eileen T. Borgia and Dorothy Schuler

Action research is an approach to professional development and improved student learning in which teachers systematically reflect on their work and make changes in their practice. It is sometimes difficult to convince teachers that change is necessary or practicable when those promoting change are outside the teacher's own classroom or when an innovation is imposed from the "top down." Undertaken by practitioners, action research involves looking at one's own practice, or a situation involving children's development, behavior, social interactions, learning difficulties, family involvement, or learning environments, and then reflecting and seeking support and feedback from colleagues. Patterson and Shannon (1993) describe action research as "inquiry in which practicing teachers try to understand the particular individuals, actions, policies, and events that make up their work environment in order to make professional decisions" (p. 8). Garner (1996) defines action research more specifically as a systematic, reflective, collaborative process that examines a situation for the purpose of planning, implementing, and evaluating change.

Appeal for Practicing Teachers

Interest in action research is growing partly because practitioners find they can be in leadership positions as they plan, conduct, and evaluate research on their own practice, instead of relying on library research or double-blind experiments. Good action research integrates theory, practice, and meaningful, concurrent application of results. While action research is a subjective study of one situation, and the results may not be generalizable, many teachers and researchers now acknowledge that wisdom can be found in the voices of individuals as they live their own experience, reflect on its meaning, and take action to change what they perceive to be in need of change. For example, early childhood educators often use ineffective traditional rituals and practices, such as daily rote exercises involving calendar and weather, holiday curricula, learning "a letter a week," and isolated skill-and-drill, in lieu of methods that result in meaningful reading or mathematics learning. While it might be difficult to stop such practices from the outside, a teacher is likely to discover their futility upon closer investigation made possible through action research. Similarly, for teachers who are expected to conduct academic tasks that are not appropriate for young children, an action research study can assist the teacher in convincing others of the value of using alternative, more meaningful methods. Several additional benefits of action research have been cited:

- Teachers investigate their own practice in a new way, taking a closer look at what children actually do and what they themselves do.
- Teachers develop a deeper understanding of children, of the teacher-learning process, and of their role in the educational lives of children.
- Teachers are viewed as equal partners with their collaborators in deciding what works best in their situation, thus reducing the possibility for unequal power relationships that might otherwise develop among university researchers, curriculum developers, administrators, and teachers (McLean, 1995).
- Solutions are arrived at cooperatively.
- Teachers are often more committed to implementation of a project that they have been involved in designing.
- Action research is an ongoing process, rather than a program, and its principles can be applied elsewhere.

The Process of Action Research

Feldman (1995) and others describe action research as a process; a unique orientation towards inquiry. Garner (1996) proposes a cyclical paradigm: "To learn is to change; to change is to create; and to create is to learn." Takala's (1994) steps in the process include the following: identify the question; create a solution; implement the solution; evaluate; and modify one's ideas and practice in light of the evaluation. At each stage, there is considerable self-reflection, collaborator reflection, and dialogue. Educators begin with a focus or question, which frequently is modified as data are gathered and the process continues. After reflection and discussion, a research question is conceptualized, and a plan of action is developed. The teacher implements the plan, observing and keeping detailed anecdotal records. Kemmis (1988) described a similar cycle as a spiral in which each cycle increases the researcher's knowledge of the original question, leading to its solution or to a new question. Gummesson (1991) noted that within the process of action research, data collection, analysis, action, decision making, implementation, and change often take place concurrently.

Tools of Action Research

The research methods are selected to respond to the particular question that is proposed. It is more common to see qualitative methods, with an emphasis on discovery and interpretation, than to see hypothesis testing, correlation studies, or other kinds of statistical analysis. Preferred methods include in-depth interviews, participant observation, case study, self-study, and telling of stories. Documentation occurs through carefully detailed descriptions of people,

PS 024844

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

events, and settings; field notes; interactive journals; memos; minutes of meetings; transcriptions; portfolios; photographs; films; and tape recordings. Validity in action research is obtained when there are multiple perspectives. Typically it is helpful to have at least three different data sources—a method referred to in the literature as triangulation (Smith, 1979). Quantitative methods, such as surveys, checklists, test scores, and report cards, can provide another perspective.

Components of Action Research—Five C's

Involvement in action research includes Commitment, Collaboration, Concern, Consideration, and Change.

Commitment. Action research takes time. The participants need time to get to know and trust each other and to observe practice, consider changes, try new approaches, and document, reflect, and interpret the results. Those who agree to participate should know that they will be involved with the project for a year or more, and that the time commitment is a factor that all participants should consider carefully.

Collaboration. In action research, the power relations among participants are equal; each person contributes, and each person has a stake. Collaboration is not the same as compromise, but it involves a cyclical process of sharing, of giving, and of taking. The ideas and suggestions of each person should be listened to, reflected upon, and respected.

Concern. The interpretive nature of action research (for example, relying on personal dialogue and a close working relationship) means that the participants will develop a support group of "critical friends." This kind of relationship requires risk taking, and a kind of vulnerability exists. Trust in each other and in the value of the project is important.

Consideration. Reflective practice is the mindful review of one's actions—specifically, one's professional actions. Reflection requires concentration and careful consideration as one seeks patterns and relationships that will generate meaning within the investigation. Reflection is a challenging, focused, and critical assessment of one's own behavior as a means of developing one's craftsmanship.

Change. For humans, growing and changing are part of the developmental cycle of life. Change is ongoing and, at times, difficult, but it is an important element in remaining effective as a teacher. Change is possible if one has the right nurturing and support, and the results are worthwhile.

Professional Support for Action Research

Action research is gaining support. In the metropolitan St. Louis, Missouri area, the Action Research Collaborative sponsored by the Danforth Foundation has provided financial and professional assistance through conferences and support groups to hundreds of researcher practitioners. The Teacher as Researcher Committee of the International Reading Association has also taken a leadership position on encouraging action research among its members. *Teachers Are Researchers: Reflection and Action* (Patterson et al., 1993) is a testament to teachers' reflective genius as collaborators and students of their own teaching.

Conclusion

Enthusiasm for action research is growing as people discover its value as a powerful vehicle for support, networking, and school reform. Educators who have used action research say that it becomes a way of life in their work. Classroom practice and children's experiences are changed, and in the process, there is improvement in learning. Professional development becomes an ongoing process in which educators and children are concurrent learners and teachers. Action research is a positive, supportive, proactive resource for change.

For More Information

Anderson, Gary, Kathryn Herr, and Ann Sigrid Nihlen. (1994). *Studying Your Own School: An Educator's Guide to Qualitative Practitioner Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. ED 378 189.

Feldman, Allan. (1995, April). Conversation in Teaching: Conversation as Research: A Self-Study of the Teaching of Collaborative Action Research. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA. ED 384 603.

Garner, Betty. (1996, May). Using Action Research: Challenges and Opportunities for the Beginner. Paper presented at the Greater St. Louis Sixth Action Research Collaborative Conference, St. Louis, MO.

Gummesson, Evert. (1991). *Qualitative Methods in Management Research*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Kemmis, Stephen, and Robin McTaggart (Eds.). (1988). *The Action Research Planner*. Victoria, BC: Deakin University.

McFarland, Katherine, and John Stansell. (1993). Historical Perspectives. In Leslie Patterson, Carol M. Santa, Kathy Short, and Karen Smith (Eds.), *Teachers Are Researchers: Reflection and Action*, pp. 12-18. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. ED 356 452.

McLean, James. (1995). *Improving Education through Action Research: A Guide for Administrators and Teachers*. The Practicing Administrator's Leadership Series: Roadmaps to Success. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. ED 380 884.

Patterson, Leslie, and Patrick Shannon. (1993). Reflection, Inquiry, Action. In Leslie Patterson, Carol M. Santa, Kathy Short, and Karen Smith (Eds.), *Teachers Are Researchers: Reflection and Action*, pp. 7-11. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. ED 356 452.

Smith, Louis. (1979). An Evolving Logic of Participant Observation, Educational Ethnography, and Other Case Studies. In L. Shulman (Ed.), *Review of Research in Education 6*, Itaska, IL: Peacock Press.

Takala, Sauli. (1994). *Action Research in the Classroom*. In *Content Instruction through a Foreign Language*. (A report on the 1992-93 TCE Programme). ED 383 197.

References identified with an ED (ERIC document) or EJ (ERIC journal) number are cited in the ERIC database. Most documents are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 900 locations worldwide and can be ordered through EDRS: (800) 443-ERIC. Journal articles are available from the original journal, interlibrary loan services, or article reproduction clearinghouses such as: UMI (800) 732-0616; or ISI (800) 523-1850.

This publication was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. DERR93002007. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI. ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced.